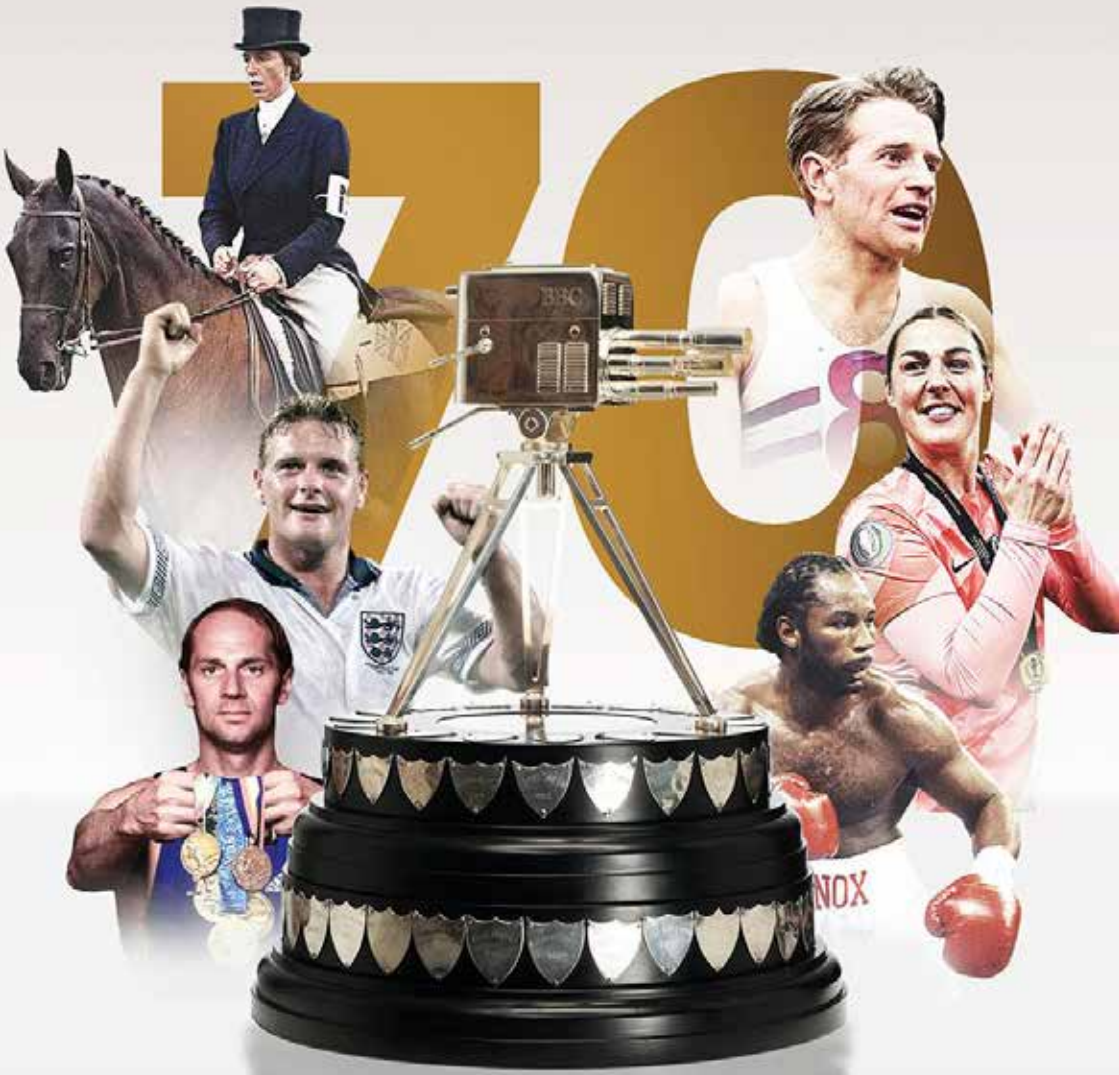
AND THE WINNER IS



70 Years of the
BBC Sports Personality of the Year

Peter Donaldson

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pitch

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AT THE 2010 SPOTY ceremony, held in Birmingham's cavernous LG Arena, there was an unexpected recipient of the Coach of the Year award. As Clive Woodward and Fabio Capello looked on, a self-employed builder from Billericay, resplendent in jeans and a Sergio Tacchini retro tracksuit top, strode on to the stage to receive his award from a fawning Sir Steve Redgrave. It was, by any calculation, a remarkable choice and the acceptance speech that followed was no less astonishing. Having first checked with Paula Radcliffe that she knew where the toilets were and commiserated with 'Giggsy' for his failure to break into the England squad, Smithy launched into an excoriating attack on the lack of drive and ambition in British sport. 'I don't see a room

full of sporting legends,' he scolded his audience of superstars, 'I see a room full of people looking for their next sponsorship deal, book deal, TV series. You wouldn't see W. G. Grace demean himself on *Ready Steady Cook*; Roger Bannister wouldn't have a Twitter account.' To the strains of Hubert Parry's 'Jerusalem', the address came to a stirring conclusion. 'Can we win the World Cup? Yes we can! Can we win at Wimbledon? Yes we can! Can we win at the Olympics? And I'm talking proper medals, not just swimming and cycling, ones that actually count – basically running. Yes we can!'

As with all good comedy, James Corden's cameo as Smithy that evening at the LG Arena feeds off deeply embedded popular attitudes. Over the last century and a quarter, the Olympics may have burgeoned into a multi-sport extravaganza, but for most of the viewing public the core has remained the track and field programme. This belief can certainly be seen in the public's choice of Sports Personality of the Year. Athletics is way out on its own in the SPOTY league table, with more winners than the next two sports (Formula One and tennis) combined. Indeed, if SPOTY is anything to go by, Smithy could have gone even further when refining his definition of 'proper medals'. Of the 18 athletes who have received the SPOTY trophy, not only have 13 been runners but ten have specialised in middle- and long-distance events.

This British love affair with endurance running was reflected by the popular vote in the first two years of the BBC award. Chris Chataway and Gordon Pirie, the winners in 1954 and 1955 respectively, were both world-record holders over 5,000m, and between them ensured meetings at the White City were sold out for much of the first half of the 1950s. They could, said one

of their contemporaries, 'have drawn a crowd for a wheelbarrow race'. Yet, while their remarkable talent helped to popularise track and field, their contrasting backgrounds and divergent approaches to training and racing also ensured that the tensions that surrounded post-war British athletics were exposed to the harsh glare of public scrutiny.

Athletics, along with many other sports, experienced a huge surge in spectators in the decade following the end of the Second World War. Boosted by the success of the 1948 London Olympics, domestic competitions regularly drew crowds that only a few elite football clubs could hope to emulate. In 1952, over 50,000 turned out to watch the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) championships at the White City Stadium. Even a meeting as modest as the Blackheath Harriers annual championship was enough to persuade 7,000 people that standing on the terraces of a blustery Motspur Park, watching enthusiastic club athletes battle the elements, was a productive way of spending a Saturday afternoon. However, for the blazered gentlemen who ran British athletics, although such interest was more than they could ever really have hoped for, there was a price to pay. A new demographic was drawn to the sport. Emboldened by welfarist educational policies, men and (to a lesser extent) women from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds flocked to local athletics clubs, harbouring expectations and aspirations very different from those of the administrators and committee members who ran things. In particular, the battle lines were drawn around the issue of amateurism.

Founded in 1880 by three Oxford graduates, the AAA enshrined the Victorian cult of the amateur gentleman. The

Association's primary function was to ensure that the army officers, civil servants, university men and business owners who made up its membership could compete without having to mix with the professional branch of the sport, pedestrianism, where runners vied for prize money. Strict and lengthy directives outlined the precise parameters of amateurism. In essence, though, the rule was if you were not a gentleman, then you could be pretty certain you were not an amateur either. As the sports historians Richard Holt and Tony Mason succinctly noted, amateurism was essentially a moral code, a deft way of ensuring that the social classes were carefully and permanently separated. Although societal changes meant the barriers between the classes gradually became more porous as the 20th century progressed, the definition of amateur remained as rigid as ever. On the eve of the 1948 Olympics, the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) saw fit to remind would-be competitors that to be deemed an amateur one must 'practise and compete only for the love of sport'. Although the federation did allow some relaxation around athletes' rights to compensation for lost earnings – what were called broken-time payments – even this minor concession was a step too far for the delicate sensibilities of British officialdom.

For the most part, Britain's insistence on holding the line on amateurism was down to the mulishness of three leading post-war athletics administrators – Jack Crump (the secretary of the British Amateur Athletic Board (BAAB)), Harold Abrahams (the secretary of the AAA) and Lord Burghley (the president of the AAA and chairman of the British Olympic Committee). Predictably, all three enjoyed privileged lifestyles borne of inherited wealth. And, even more predictably, all three were given

to offering up lengthy homilies about the corrupting influence of money. Abrahams and Burghley, who had won Olympic golds in 1924 and 1928 respectively, both held firm to the belief that any form of financial reward would undermine the very purpose of sport. Participating solely for 'the thrill and good fellowship of competition', Burghley told a group of his peers at the AAA's annual general meeting in 1959, would help athletes become 'good citizens'. Crump, if possible, was even more unyielding. The International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to grant competitors at the 1956 Olympics in Australia a trifling daily allowance for incidentals was proof, he felt, that sport was going to hell in a handcart. Consequently, while he and his fellow administrators enjoyed an all-expenses-paid stay at one of Melbourne's finest hotels, British athletes were not even given the IOC's corrupting pocket money to spend on a soft drink and light snack in the Olympic village's communal cafeteria.

Inevitably, this refusal to countenance any change, no matter how negligible, to the boundaries of amateurism provoked opposition from athletes trying to balance work and training. Combined with other petty indignities (separate tables at mealtimes for Oxbridge athletes, first-class travel for officials while competitors slummed it in economy), intransigence over any form of financial compensation added to the impression of a sport stuck in the era of the Victorian gentleman amateur. Tensions were hardly eased by Crump's penchant for courting controversy in the press. 'In general,' he undiplomatically informed readers of the *Daily Mail*, 'the less fortunately educated tended to display a slight inferiority complex and were less ready to feel on equal terms with the university athletes.' This sort of talk did little to

appease working-class runners from the industrial north, such as Walter Hesketh, the British six-mile record holder. Hesketh, who had started work shining shoes in Manchester's St Anne's Square aged 14, was sure his exclusion from the 1952 Helsinki Olympic squad was the result of institutional prejudice. The selectors, he complained to a Manchester AC club-mate, 'will always pick a Southerner [in preference to a northerner]. And they would always choose a university man over a non-university man, and of the university people Oxford and Cambridge over the rest.'[5]

Yet, if the first poll for the BBC's SPOTY was anything to go by, it was just possible that Crump and his cronies had been reading the public mood accurately after all. Born in Chelsea, educated at Sherborne and Magdalen College, Oxford, and a member of the exclusive Achilles Club, the public's choice for SPOTY 1954, Chris Chataway, could not have conformed more closely to the establishment's ideal of a true amateur even if Burghley himself had been given the casting vote. In fact, it just so happened that Chataway was part of a talented cohort of Oxbridge athletes (which included sub-four-minute miler Roger Bannister and Olympic steeplechase gold medallist Chris Brasher) who were coming to their peak in the mid-1950s. Both in approach and attitude, these men seemed to be throwbacks to a lost golden age. Bannister insisted that running was no more than a diversion. He trained for 45 minutes two or three times a week he revealed to the editor of *Athletics Weekly*, but 'couldn't give precise details on what he did because it all depended on how he felt'. Chataway followed an equally relaxed regimen. He was anxious, he later recalled, 'not to get too stale … by pounding

out mile after mile'. Sport was, after all, 'a hobby', and he wasn't prepared to 'subjugate his life to it'.

Chataway's gentlemanly ethos and (the less charitable might argue) limited training were both in evidence at his first outing to the Olympics in 1952. Pushing himself to the very edge of exhaustion, he surged into the lead with just 300m to go in the 5,000m, before dramatically collapsing to the track as the imperious Czech Emil Zatopek swept past him round the final bend. Fifth place may have been bitterly disappointing after coming so close to victory but, as every English schoolboy raised on a diet of Rudyard Kipling knew, it was how you treated the imposter of disaster that defined character. And Chataway was the embodiment of magnanimity. 'I have no complaints,' he cheerily told the *Daily Mail*. 'Zatopek may have brushed past me causing me to lose my balance but I was at the end of my tether when I fell. The better man won.' Here was the true amateur spirit. No wonder, the *Mail* enthused, 'our man received an ovation as great as that of the winner'.

It was, though, in 1954 that Chataway really broke through into the popular consciousness. Having helped Bannister to his historic sub-four-minute mile in May, he then narrowly missed securing a world record for himself the following month when winning the two miles at the British Games. His time of 8min 41sec was less than a second shy of the mark set by the great Belgian Gaston Reiff. Once again, for the press, it was Chataway's nonchalant manner that was most noteworthy about the performance. 'The outlook of a man who celebrates the missing of a world record by about four yards in two miles by smoking a cigarette,' the *Sunday Times* wistfully suggested, 'is

something worth keeping in the age of grim determination to run faster and ever faster.' Four months later, the Oxford man's athletic prowess and disarming insouciance combined to deliver the sporting moment of the year.

After lengthy negotiations, the AAA had managed to secure permission to invite, for the first time, the all-conquering Soviet team to Britain for a match between London and Moscow at the White City. In the Cold War era, such encounters were about much more than simply sport; they were seen as key battlegrounds in the struggle for prestige between East and West. For Britain, in particular, creaking under the weight of its industrial and imperial past and largely sidelined in the emergent superpower conflict, victory against Eastern Bloc athletes provided some form of reassurance that all was not entirely lost. Little wonder then that the BBC chose to broadcast the meeting live, and that 12 million viewers opted to tune in to watch the drama unfold. In a night full of intriguing clashes, the most eagerly anticipated was the duel over 5,000m between Chataway and the new Soviet star Vladimir Kuts, who had broken the world record for the event just two months earlier when taking the European crown in Bern.

And, for once, the action lived up to the hype. On a crisp October night, with spotlights sweeping round the track, the two favourites matched each other stride for stride until Chataway, head flung back, inched ahead in the final few yards to breast the tape in a new world record. For a nation steeped in the amateur tradition, here was proof that our best years could still be ahead of us. 'The gay blade from Oxford who will smoke a cigar and drink a glass of stout with the best of them,' the *Daily Mirror* raved, 'has shown that we've still got it in us to turn in with nonchalance a

world-shattering performance, an epic with a grin.' A weakness for the occasional gasper was also used as shorthand for innate superiority by the *Mail*. Casually puffing away on a well-earned cigarette at the post-race press conference, Chataway, the paper admiringly noted, readily admitted to not having 'trained so hard in the past five weeks. I usually smoke ten cigarettes a day, but I cut those out in the last three days.' Such an easy-going attitude, it was assumed, would hardly have cut the mustard with the taskmasters who oversaw the merciless training schedules of the Soviet squad.

Having attracted front-page headlines and a mass television audience, it came as a surprise to no one (except apparently the BBC) that Chataway went on to be crowned the inaugural Sports Personality of the Year at the Savoy Hotel in December. Roger Bannister, whom the mandarins at Broadcasting House had assumed would win but whose epoch-defining feat had been played out, not at the White City on live TV, but in the rather more homely surroundings of Oxford's Iffley Road track in front of just one static camera, had to settle for second place on the night and the opportunity to present his erstwhile pacemaker with the trophy. The press was certain the right man had won. Pat Reckie of the *Mail* summed up the prevailing view. Not only had Chataway, by defeating Kuts, proven he was a world-class athlete in his own right, declared Reckie, but 'he had also found glory in helping others without ever attempting to attract to himself that glory which he earned for them'. Who said the days of the old Corinthian spirit were over?[6]

Well, perhaps Chataway's successor as Sports Personality of the Year didn't say it, but he almost certainly thought it. Determinedly confrontational in public and ruthlessly professional

in private, the only quality that Gordon Pirie appeared to share with his Oxford-educated predecessor was a preternatural talent for distance running. The difference between the two stars was not lost on the press of the day. 'Never were there two such contrasting types!' a headline in *Picture Post* gleefully announced on the eve of the Melbourne Olympics. In the accompanying six-page spread, Pirie, 'the paint salesman', was presented as an austere automaton who spent his every waking hour grinding out his professional coach's punishing training sessions, while Chataway, the gifted amateur who had 'entered running almost by accident', was cast as a cheerful bon viveur who, when the fancy took him, went for the occasional jog.

The popular monthly magazine *World Sports* juxtaposed extracts from interviews with the two athletes to draw out equally stark distinctions. 'To achieve world's best performances,' Pirie rather ominously insisted, 'the athlete must concentrate on … time and distance devouring schedules, unimaginable a decade ago, which will produce a machine.' This brave new world of athletics was too much for Chataway. 'There remain,' he demurred, 'a number of athletes who cannot or will not train everyday throughout the year. A more limited programme, perhaps an hour four days a week during the training months may produce a fresher approach on the day of the big race.' Even the visuals were used to accentuate differences. A photograph of the two rivals training together, which appeared in another feature, this time in *Picture Post*, had a jaunty Chataway springing along dressed in his GB kit, while a grimly determined Pirie followed on wrapped up in a blue tracksuit emblazoned with the letters CCCP – a daring sartorial choice for the Cold War era.

Pirie's courting of controversy was not simply restricted to his choice of training gear. He was, his wife said, 'a kind of Angry Young Man'. And like John Osborne and Kingsley Amis, he railed against the attitudes and values of the Establishment. In particular, he had no time for the 'elderly dictators' who, through 'the old school tie and the old pals' act', upheld what he called the 'hypocrisy of British amateurism'. If athletics in Britain was to catch up with the rest of the world, he argued, it would need scientific training, state investment and permission for athletes to make 'a reasonable living free of humiliating patronage'.

Such views were hardly exceptional in the 1950s – even Chataway thought athletics should be made into an open sport as quickly as possible – but what did make Pirie stand out was the vigour with which he pursued his convictions. Both in the sports pages of the daily press and, more importantly, on the athletics tracks across the world, he made abundantly clear that he was committed to approaching his career in a scientifically professional manner. He freely admitted to giving up his job as a bank clerk to work as a sales rep for Wilkinson's paint so he could have more time to devote to training. And this was at a time when AAA regulations specifically stipulated that an athlete could be employed as a salesman 'only if it was his normal activity'. His training regime of two sessions a day and over 100 miles a week was revolutionary in its intensity, and left little doubt to even the most casual observer that running, far from being an amateur hobby, was to all intents and purpose his primary focus in life. Perhaps most controversial of all was his association with the professional coach Woldemar Gerschler. There were dark rumours that Gerschler used athletes as guinea pigs to test

some of his more contentious techniques, and pictures of Pirie, oxygen mask clamped to his face being put through his paces at Gerschler's Institute of Physical Training in Freiburg, hardly helped to quell the disquiet.

But, of course, despite all the controversy and occasional negative publicity, Pirie's public standing chiefly depended on his performances on the track and over the country, and here he consistently delivered. In 1951, when only 20, he broke the British record for six miles. Two years later he set new British records at two miles, three miles, 5,000m and 10,000m. He won the National Cross Country Championship three years in a row between 1953 and 1955. And, in 1956, he broke the world records for both the 5,000m and 3,000m, the latter twice. The one blemish on what was an otherwise impeccable CV was an inability to translate record-breaking form into championship medals. His tally of one Olympic silver (for the 5,000m in Melbourne) and one European bronze (5,000m in Stockholm) did not really do justice to his enormous talent. Nonetheless, the combination of scandal and expectation that surrounded Pirie ensured that, from an early age, he was sporting box office. During the 1950s, his biographer claimed 'no man or woman in British sport made headlines more consistently'. And there is certainly plenty of evidence of his public appeal. A waxwork of Pirie featured in Madame Tussauds; he was interviewed on *Woman's Hour*; he made an appearance on *What's My Line?*; he was even nominated as one of *Picture Post*'s 'Britons who will make a mark in 1954', alongside Harold Macmillan and (who else?) Benny Hill.

Ironically, Pirie's SPOTY triumph came in what was for him a relatively lacklustre year. A series of world-record attempts over

the summer of 1955 all ended in failure and his season appeared to be about to fizzle out in late autumn when, as had happened for Chataway a year earlier, a televised match against a team from behind the Iron Curtain captured the public's imagination. For the first time since 1948, the great Emil Zatopek, the reigning Olympic champion over 5,000m, 10,000m and (incredibly!) the marathon, was due to race in Britain as part of the 'Prague' team for a match against London. With the White City arc lights barely piercing the gloom of a foggy October evening, the key clash, Zatopek versus Pirie over 10,000m, unfolded in front of 40,000 exuberant spectators and a live television audience of nearly 11 million. Zatopek, elbows akimbo and head lolling like a man in the last throes of strangulation, repeatedly attempted to break the field before eventually succumbing to a last-lap surge by a triumphant Pirie. The tabloids were again quick to locate the victory in the wider context of Cold War geopolitics. Pirie's heroics, the front page of the *Daily Express* reassured middle England, had 'put the prestige back in Britain'. Four days later, a second defeat of Zatopek, this time in Manchester over 5,000m, helped to install Pirie as one of the front runners for the SPOTY trophy.

For most athletes, being crowned Sports Personality of the Year is a time for proud reflection, a chance to bask in some well-earned glory and to graciously thank family and friends for their support. Few would consider it the opportune moment to launch into a vitriolic assault on the sporting press. But Pirie, of course, never felt much bound by convention. With the *Sporting Record*'s 'Sportsman of the Year' award up for grabs as well as the BBC's SPOTY, it was, in retrospect, probably an unwise move to save

until the night of the ceremony the news that journalists had not even included the nation's favourite athlete on their shortlist of likely winners for either honour. Comfortably topping the public polls for both awards did nothing to improve Pirie's mood. 'Fleet Street sportswriters,' he admonished his audience of Fleet Street sportswriters, 'do incredible damage to British sport. A few unkind words inflict more damage than they realise.' They must, he therefore concluded, try to 'be kinder in future'. It was hard to tell whether the single clap that broke the ensuing silence was ironic.

The response in the following morning's papers was as harsh as it was predictable. The *Daily Mirror*'s veteran sports editor, Peter Wilson, had been so affronted by Pirie's speech, he revealed to his readers, that it had made him 'storm out', although not apparently before he had heard enough to know that it was 'all mawkish rubbish'. Even *The Express*'s Desmond Hackett, who had been specifically exempted from the blanket criticism of the night before, was critical of what he felt was an 'ill-timed outburst'. One of the few more balanced assessments of the whole sorry episode came, perhaps unsurprisingly, from a journalist who had also experienced the pressures of top-class athletics. Pirie's resentment, Chris Brasher felt, was understandable given 'he has had, since he was 20, the publicity of a film star without any of the material benefits that compensate for the assumption by the public and press that they own part of anyone in the news'. Brasher's eulogy at Pirie's memorial service 35 years later was equally perceptive and served as a fitting summary of his great rival's career. 'Gordon was,' he told the gathered mourners, 'the first Briton to throw off the cloak of amateurism and put his whole being into the pursuit of excellence.'[7]